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# The Birth of the European Union: Challenging the Myth of the Civilian Power Narrative

Sören Philipps\*

**Abstract:** »Die „Zivilmacht EU“ im Lichte der Planungen zur „Europäischen Verteidigungsgemeinschaft“ (EVG). Kritik eines Deutungsmusters«. The virtues of counterfactual thinking in history lie in its potential to induce critical reflection on the past and to highlight historical alternatives, thereby enabling the reassessment of prevailing interpretation patterns. This article illustrates these points with reference to the European Defence Community (EDC) and its conflicting relationship with the “civilian power”-character the EU claims to hold. Despite of its failure in 1954, EDC’s sheer existence suffices for problematizing the inevitability of EU’s civilian character as a pre-determined feature arising from integration history. Therefore a specific counterfactual scenario is not needed for criticizing this master narrative. EDC’s short history challenges the assumption of deliberate choice in favour of “civilianness” in European external relations, and underlines the general openness of historical processes on this background.

**Keywords:** European Defence Community (EDC), European Union (EU), civilian power, counterfactual.

## Introduction

Counterfactual thinking in historical science is neither equitable with speculation nor does it seek to legitimize it. Rather, counterfactuals may serve as an analytical tool if their inherent limits are duly taken into account. “What if” questions are not just tempting as an intellectual game; rather, they bear explanatory potential because of their capacity to change research perspectives and challenge the dominating interpretations of the past. Therefore, an accurate use of counterfactual thinking may be insightful if the standards of history as a scientific subject are closely observed. I will highlight these remarks using a brief case study in the field of European integration history. The aim of this piece is to assess the consequences for the character of the European Union (EU) as a “civilian power” had a European Defence Community (EDC) been achieved. This necessitates delving into some of the historical origins beforehand.

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European integration in institutional terms began with the setup of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC, founded on April 18, 1951), establishing supranational authority over a small, yet important sector of the economy. The emerging Cold War brought about plans to adopt supranational control over the military sector as well, in the form of a “European Defence Community”(EDC). Thereby, EDC fundamentally affected the traditional core of a nation state’s political authority for the signatories (Krüger 2003, 188-9). Unsurprisingly, intense negotiations over the EDC throughout the early 1950s pointed to its dual character as both a military as well as a political endeavour (Meier-Dörnberg 1985, 288-90). At the same time, it highlighted the complex and mutually intertwined political questions of that period: East-West relations, Germany’s territorial and political unity, and finally, the question of German rearmament (Loth 1993, 91-6). After having reached a consensus on the EDC treaty, and with successful ratification processes in Germany, Benelux (and with the ratification in Italy close at hand), EDC failed to finally be ratified in the French National Assembly in August 1954 (Lipgens 1985, 28-30). Up until today, the military sector remains subject to national authority.

Nevertheless, numerous steps have been taken to widen and deepen the integration process in various areas, including within the military sector: In the Treaty of Maastricht (TEU) in 1992, the European Union declared its role in external relations for the first time and introduced a “Common Foreign and Security Policy” as its 2nd pillar. The Treaties of Amsterdam (1999) and Nice (2003) substantiated this political aim by incorporating the “Petersburg tasks” (peacekeeping and peacemaking) into the existing set of instruments for crisis prevention and crisis reaction (Western European Union (WEU) 1992). The Treaty of Nice also implemented a newly created “European Security and Defence Policy” (ESDP) into the 2nd pillar. Currently, the EU is in charge of “Battle Groups”, which resemble a European standing army and are supported by newly institutionalized advisory bodies like the “EU Military Staff” (EUMS) and the “EU Military Committee” (EUMC). Defence and military capabilities are central to considerations regarding the EU’s future role in a globalized world. In sum, steadily, but not without setbacks, the EU has sought to enhance its non-civilian instruments and develop military capacities of its own beyond NATO in order to fully establish itself as a global player which it already is in the economic sector.

Despite the remaining deficits and shortcomings of CFSP (Euractiv.com 2003), these developments have raised concerns regarding the overall direction of the integration process as well as its normative foundation (Blauberger 2005, 53). The EU, traditionally regarded as a “civilian power” with the military sector still not subject to supranational authority, is in fact or is on its way to becoming “not such a soft power” (Giegerich and Wallace 2004, 163-182). Nevertheless, being in line with its positive self image, the EU resorts to established civilian mechanisms for fostering peaceful relationships with third coun-

tries (Risse-Kappen 1995, 3). At the same time, it remains the world's largest single donor of humanitarian aid (European Commission 2007, DG ECHO). German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier recently described the EU as a "civilian power with teeth" (Steinmeier 2007), alluding to the fact that traditional "civilian power" assumptions and the EU's new Security Strategy (European Council 2003) have entered into a troubled relationship. Critics fear a slow "militarization" of the EU's foreign policy (Pflüger 2005, 113), while others point to the prevailing civilian character of the EU (Senghaas 1992, 78).

I do not intend to take a stance in this debate by analysing or extrapolating current trends, but rather to reflect on its presuppositions (Rinke 2007, 115). Most discussants act on the assumption of an inherent civilian nature of the European integration process, implicitly making Europe's historical "civilian-ness" their central point of reference. The current developments are evaluated as to their potential to alter this character (Smith 2005, 6-12). To assess this prevailing narrative, I will focus on the early stages of European integration, with particular emphasis given to the EDC. The idea of the EDC in and of itself is not a counterfactual, but the possible implications of its successful ratification for the "civilian power" narrative are. In order to discuss this issue, I will

- 1) describe the roots of the "civilian power" narrative and provide a definition of the term
- 2) historically contextualize the EDC by highlighting the conditions for its development and failure, and
- 3) sketch the implications of these empirical findings for the civilian power narrative.

Counterfactual reasoning, as understood in this context, goes beyond mere speculation. Rather, it draws our attention to historical alternatives that did not occur in practice, but exist as an option in a certain period of the past. As such, the EDC represents a historical fact.

## 1. Historical origins of the "civilian power" narrative

The "civilian power" narrative rests upon at least two main ideas which can be identified at different stages of the integration process:

The ECSC already entailed normative features since supranational control was supposed to render future military aggression impossible. When proposing the idea on May 9th, 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman was convinced that pooling together the economic capacities of the former enemies France and Germany (along with those of the other signatories Italy and Benelux) would prevent future wars. In his words, equally shared authority over the heavy industries would "make war not only unthinkable but materially impos-

sible.”<sup>1</sup> Starting from a small sector within the economy, this pattern of political cooperation and integration termed the “Monnet-method” was expected to “spill over” to other sectors, which were still exclusively under national authority at that time. In this context, European integration was seen as a mechanism for establishing and safeguarding peace to the *inside*, that is, among European nation states (Loth 1993, 9-90). For the President of the European Parliament (EP), Hans-Gert Pöttering, this still renders the EU “a giant peace project” (Pöttering 2004).

Even as the emerging *European Economic Community* (EEC, founded in 1957) expanded its responsibilities and functions, the military sector remained comparably weak in terms of institutionalization, decision-making processes and military capabilities. In the 1970s, Francois Duchene, an influential political advisor to Jean Monnet, became the first to describe Europe as a “civilian power” (Duchene 1973a, 11-35). Duchene’s position emanated from perceiving the Community as an entity that relied on diplomacy, economic and political incentives. Multilateralism and reluctance to use military force were other prominent features. Duchene wrote that “the stalemate of the Cold War has devaluated purely military power” (Duchene 1973b, 19). Like Duchene, scholars analysing the EU’s internal structure more recently have argued that *bargaining* represents the EU’s main mode of operation towards the *outside*, that is, towards third countries (Rhinar and Kaeding 2005).

In sum, the theoretical-structural as well as the political-empirical features of EU integration hint at “civilianness” in European domestic politics and external affairs. Democratic peace theory endorses both notions by suggesting a mutual relationship between the inner nature of a regime and its behaviour to the outside (Deutsch 1979, 246). However, “civilian power”, understood as the absence or non-use of strong military forces, implies being the product of specific circumstances given at a time, without convincingly explaining the alleged cohesion between the internal regime structure and external behaviour. During the Cold War, Europe was safeguarded by the “atomic umbrella” provided by the US and NATO (Salweski 2004, 152), and these disparities of power continue to exist until today (Kagan 2001, 113). In this context, as critics have argued, “civilian power” may represent a positive self description more than an analytical category for behavioural structures, causes and factors. In short, Duchene’s “civilian power” tends to make a virtue out of a weakness. Nevertheless, it can be stated that being a civilian power implies

- the acceptance of the necessity of cooperation with others in the pursuit of international objectives;

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<sup>1</sup> Schumann-Declaration, Full Text: [http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/9-may/decl\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/9-may/decl_en.htm) (22.11.2008, 13:30).

- the concentration on non-military, primarily economic means to secure national goals, with military power left as a last resort instrument serving essentially to safeguard other means of international interaction; and
- a willingness to develop supranational structures to address critical issues of international management (Mauil 1990, 92-3).

For the EU, these conditions are mainly fulfilled (Dembinski 2002, 3), co-existing consistently with other definitions of “soft power” (Nye 2004, 1-32). Being thus defined, what insights does the EDC’s short history provide for the civilian power narrative – more precisely, how does it relate to the claimed *inherence of civility* within the integration process? To provide an answer, we have to examine the short history of the EDC.

## 2. The European Defence Community: Functions and reasons for its development and failure

The EDC was supposed to serve similar functions in the military sector as the ECSC did in the economic realm, namely protecting against exaggerated nationalism and totalitarianism through supranationalism, integrating West Germany into a stable international system and finally, providing the will to attain a political position for Europe on the global level which was dominated by the US and the Soviet Union (Lipgens 1985, 9-30; Loth 1993, 92-4).

The idea of a unified Europe was popular after the end of World War II, and the European federalist movement, emerging in all European countries, therefore promoted a Union of European nations and peoples that should act as a bridge between the East and West (Lipgens 1985, 12-9; Loth 1993, 52-9). However, the extensive aspirations of the European Federalists as were declared in August 1947 (a European government responsible to citizens and groups, not to nation states; a Court of Justice capable of settling conflicts between member states; and an armed police force under authority of the federation) could not be realized at once. Nevertheless, the federalists saw the future of the continent in a federation with the entire features characteristic of a nation state, including the enforcement of its policies.

But still Western Germany was subject to allied command. German armed police forces and soldiers were prohibited under the occupation statute. The demilitarization of Germany was one of the aims the former allies had agreed upon at the Berlin Conference (July 17 – August 2, 1945). West German rearmament after 1945 was not regarded an urgent issue. Early opinion polls showed that West Germans rejected rearmament in high percentages due to pacifist assumptions and negative effects concerning the reunification of divided Germany (Volkman 1990, 107-32). Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, however, considered rearmament as a way out of the existing occupation statute to regain national political autonomy. Germany’s neighbour states, especially France, were horrified by the idea of a new German army. Within the US ad-

ministration, however, the argument gained strength that West Germany's economic and military potential was needed in order to counteract the Soviet threat. This re-evaluation of the Soviet Union's political, strategic and military ambitions was based upon the seemingly expansive and aggressive communist ideology, which was believed to determine the Soviet Union's external relations (Zeeman 1990, 400).

The outbreak of the Korean War on June 25th, 1950 acted as a catalyst for the domestic and international debate on German rearmament and the future of the emerging integration process in Europe. Korea seemingly verified the pattern by which communist regimes were expected to expand their sphere of influence. For Western Europe, protection became a top issue and this included military protection. The EDC can hardly be understood without this Cold War context. The plan developed by French Prime Minister Rene Pleven was an answer to US pressure about the issue of West German rearmament and resulted from the apprehension of France's political isolation in this question. The so-called Pleven Plan (October 24th 1950) tried to fulfil different demands: protection *for* West Germany (and Western Europe) by military deterrence; at the same time protection *against* West Germany (protection for West Germany's neighbours) by integrating into a system that prevents national solo attempts (at establishing an army as well as at military endeavours); military effectiveness in order to answer to Soviet aggression adequately; and finally, independence from US military influence (Meier-Dörnberg 1985, 283-90).

In more detail, the Pleven Plan contained provisions for the installation of a European Defence Minister, holding the same authority as a defence minister in a nation state. Pleven expected a French person to assume this office, which would have been favourable for domestic public and political discussions. Along with the European Defence Minister, a European Assembly was supposed to be institutionalized as a controlling body. Soldiers as well as supplies (vehicles, weapons) were intended to become completely absorbed into this European Army – serving again as additional protection against West Germany. Moreover, West Germany, unlike the other expected signatories (France, Italy and the Benelux) would neither have had access to national troops, nor ever be in command of a national army. The Pleven plan, therefore, sketched maximum protection against Germany while raising concerns about its military effectiveness (Wiggershaus 1986, 253-65). For this reason, the US continued to favour a NATO solution for safeguarding Western Europe and keeping their political influence. This resulted in parallel diplomacy between the international actors who pursued the EDC and NATO as options at the same time. But for the time being, the EDC was seen as the ideal way out of the dilemma of contradictory conditions: US demands, West German ambitions, and French fears. Not least important is the fact that the EDC combined the unpopular rearmament of West Germany with a highly appreciated and popular aim, namely the integration of Europe (Jacobsen 1975, 61-99). In addition, pro-

Europeans believed that the EDC served as a motor for further integration (Woyke 1989, 179). In fact, plans for a political union with a federal structure were discussed among the signatories in 1953, thereby seeking to add the political roof for a supranationalized military sector.

Why did the EDC fail, especially since the Pleven Plan followed the pattern of the successful ECSC? Some authors see the latter as exactly the reason, since the functional method that was so successful in the economic sector did not correspond with the ‘military spirit’ – i.e. treating military questions almost like another branch of the economy and therefore neglecting its centrality to political authority (Lipgens 1985, 28-30). The Pleven plan envisioned detailed military provisions, but its political framework was not given equal attention. This was an inner weakness of the EDC. It was tragic that the federalist demand for a constitutional way of forming a European government was not reconsidered in this context (Loth 1993, 140). Robert Schuman himself observed this when he declared:

Those who follow the same aim like us criticize the creation of an army before the creation of a European authority, a European government and a European parliament. Pure logic seems to justify this critique. But politicians must elaborate and tolerate partial solutions for urgent matters. (...) We are convinced that Europe will be built sector by sector (Lipgens 1985, 24).

Another burden was the electoral success of the Gaullists in France in 1951, resulting in a meltdown of political supporters of the EDC. Precisely because of its supranational provisions, Gaullists rejected this endeavour (Loth, 1993, 108-12). In the end, after troubled but finally successful ratification processes in Benelux and Germany (and with Italy’s ratification close at hand), the EDC failed to finally be ratified by France’s national assembly on August 30th, 1954.

Ironically, this collapse of a French plan for German rearmament and European military protection was caused by France itself, since it increasingly suspected the EDC of being an instrument for US influence rather than a catalyst for European integration and independence (Guillen 1990, 440-3). Other factors included the reserved position of Great Britain towards European military integration (Jansen 1992, 62-94), the anti-German and anti-American agitation of Gaullists and communists which resulted in decreasing public support for the EDC, the recovering economy which – due to US support – spread a general feeling of satisfaction with the status quo and decreased the urgency of the EDC, and finally the decline of the “European Political Community” (EPC) as a project of European governments. The EPC would have provided a political superstructure for the EDC through which the general debate on furthering European integration would have returned to the spotlight (Lipgens 1985, 29-30). All these factors, along with the conditions stemming from international politics, have to be taken into account as playing a role in determining the EDC’s fate.



### 3. Implications of successful EDC ratification for the “civilian power” narrative

So far we have seen the emphasis resting upon the EDC’s political aspects instead of its effectiveness in military terms (Meier-Dörnberg 1985, 290). Even the quick realization of the NATO option for West German rearmament in 1955 is no contradiction to it; rather, it shows the variability of military concepts serving similar functions in external and domestic policies as the EDC would have (Maier 1990, 465-67), with the decisive exception of European integration. The EDC might have had a strong positive impact on faster and/or deeper supranational integration (Thoß 1990, 475; Woyke 1989, 175-9). But, as we have seen, even for the European federalist movement, “civilian power” assumptions played a minor role, if at all. Civilianness was intended to be established, first of all, towards the inside – that is, among European states, by the ECSC. Foreign and external policy of the new supranational entity remained largely outside those considerations, or they followed traditional patterns of power politics against the background of the emerging Cold War (Dietl 2006, 241-46). In the case of a successful ratification of the EDC, what use would Europe have made of it? The answers are difficult to formulate. From a social-constructivist point of view, positive experiences with the EDC might have resulted in abandoning German ambitions for national military capacities over time. Admittedly, this would have depended on the other signatories’ use of the EDC and their own (national) ambitions. A direct or indirect involvement of the EDC for national endeavours (e.g. France in Indochina) might have led to opposite results. For example, even a Gaullist government could have tried to make pragmatic use of EDC provisions at the military level without fostering the idea of a political union. This would have overshadowed the integration process (as it did with the “empty chair crisis” in July 1965, which was provoked by DeGaulle’s refusal to deepen integration). But it is also possible to regard the EDC as a motor for integration, following the functionalist logic of integration. This would have possibly steered the integration process into the direction of a federalist construction since an already integrated military sector would not have left many alternatives to supranationalizing other political sectors that are much less central to a nation state’s authority in comparison. In sum, EDC might have accelerated and deepened the integration process – but the question is whether this would have altered its “civilian character”? As discussed above, national rivalries could have persisted even under the EDC. A stronger negative effect could be expected on Europe’s external relations in which the EDC might have resulted in an intensification of the Cold War, with Europe perceiving itself as a new military actor on the global level that pursues its own political agenda.

Most of the likely military-political effects of the EDC could have tempted Europe to assume the role of a global actor, according to the example of the

superpowers of the US and the Soviet Union. Of course, the EDC alone could not have brought about this effect. But as integration is a process that is influenced by external and internal shocks, crisis and setbacks, as well as by learning from its own success, Western Europe might have discovered its role as an actor in external relations long before the Maastricht Treaty. Admittedly, it is still an open question as to what extent the EDC might have altered the existing conditions in the 1950s. This remains a blind spot in our argumentation. But as a matter of fact, the EDC would have overtrumped today's CFSP in competences, capabilities, lean decision-making structures and many other details. Given the current debate on the EU's militarization, this is not a positive outlook on the persistence of "civilian power".

But before speculating on proxy wars and arms races resulting from the EDC, we should consider the argument that the absence of military capabilities and joint command in Western Europe is a logical and historical prerequisite for Duchene's concept. Therefore, we do not need to argue in favour of a specific counterfactual scenario, because we simply do not *know* what would have happened. Our enquiry may help us to define "clouds" of influential factors, that is, a set of historical conditions responsible for the EDC's temporary success and final failure.

The metaphor of a cloud helps us to define the extent to which counterfactuals are "allowed" and useful in historical science: A cloud is an entity consisting of millions of vaporized water drops, but its shape becomes blurry the closer one approaches it; its boundaries are hard to define. Furthermore, a cloud is exposed to and influenced by external factors – temperature, air pressure, sun and wind, as well as topographical features of the landscape. Even with computers the course of a single cloud is difficult to predict, let alone their interference with other clouds. Chaos theory maintains that slight changes in the overall setup of conditions may alter the outcome dramatically. All these points raised by this metaphor apply to counterfactuals in history, too: There is no point in arguing for a *specific* alternative scenario, since we might not be able to fully take all factors into account – particularly since in the field of society and politics, coincidence and human attitudes are factors that simply cannot be neglected. There is no predetermination in history, neither in retrospect nor in projection. As a consequence, we should concentrate on the plenitude of details that influence historical processes and developments, and pay attention to their multiple nature at each step of the analysis and maintain the overall openness of the outcome. In other words, we should refrain from making long-term weather forecasts and concentrate instead on the analysis of the complexities behind perceived phenomena.

In sum, my point is that the counterfactual question "what if" may not altogether be the correct one to ask. The reason is that a re-estimation of the "civilian power" narrative does not depend on a specific alternative scenario. It suffices to emphasize the openness of a historical process that is linked to a

detailed concept for military protection at a certain period of time. The EDC arose from a Cold War context as a politically charged construction with different and sometimes contradicting aspirations connected to it. Its short history challenges the assumption of deliberate choice in favour of “civilianness” in European external relations. This may be enough for a re-evaluation of the civilian power narrative as a feature that is claimed to be inevitably bound to European integration. Finally, counterfactual thinking in historical sciences is nothing new or special: It is an analytical tool, a hermeneutic instrument to define decisive factors behind developments of the past and raise awareness for the existence of historical alternatives, regardless of their actual success. The past contains much more than just the one option that has emerged. Because of the linearity of time, the present always tends to be seen as the only option possible. But historians are neither advocates of victors nor of victorious developments. Rather, they point out the openness of historical processes. In this sense, counterfactual thinking challenges the dominating interpretations of history and, at the same time, dissents with any predetermination of its course.

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